

# The End of the Line?

BY BILL LUEDERS

Writing in 1956, the nationally syndicated columnist James Reston reflected on the enduring power of whistle-stop train campaigns to connect politicians to the people they aspire to represent. As he put it:

“Despite all the obituaries written by the new generation of television and airplane political strategists, there is something about [a] railroad political caravan that no flying machine or magic lantern (television) can replace.” A train, Reston mused, is “substantial as a Presidential nominee should be,” and is “all wrapped up in the history and symbolism of the Republic.”

Whistle-stop campaigns have been part of American politics for almost as long as there have been trains. The first presidential candidate to campaign by train was William Henry Harrison, in his unsuccessful first bid for the office in 1836, less than a decade after the nation’s first railroad tracks were laid.

Harry S. Truman used whistle-stop campaigning to such great effect in his 1948 election that, four years later, a lawsuit was filed in federal court seeking to block him from taking a whistle-stop tour on behalf of his would-be Democratic successor, Adlai Stevenson. The lawsuit by a nonsupporter said this would deprive the citizenry of the President’s “abilities, time, and undivided attention.” It was thrown out of court.

Socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs dubbed his 1908 campaign train “The Red Special.” Bill Clinton rode “The 21st Century Express” to his nominating convention while his Republican rival, Bob Dole, campaigned on the more somberly named “Balanced Budget Express.” Other notable campaign train names: George W. Bush’s 2000 “Change the Tone Tour” and Joe Biden’s 2020 “Build Back Better Express.”

All of this and much more is tracked in a new book by Edward Segal, a political campaign veteran nursing his “obsession” with campaign trains. *Whistle-Stop Politics* is a high-speed, low-turbulence venture into a small but illuminating facet of U.S. electoral politics.

The term whistle-stop was coined by railroad officials to denote towns too inconsequential to merit regularly scheduled stops; it first came into parlance as a term for campaign trains in Truman’s 1948 tour, during which he traveled nearly 32,000 miles and gave 356 speeches. Amazingly, that wasn’t even a record. In 1904, Teddy Roosevelt gave 673 train speeches; in 1908, William Howard Taft racked up 114,500 train-traveling miles.

This method of campaigning was physically grueling for all involved, from the reporters who rode along to the support teams and candidates. During the 1908 campaign, “Comrade Debs” became so exhausted he “could hardly crawl out of his berth,” his biographer said. During some stops, he had his “dead-ringer” brother, Theodore, stand in for him, without speaking.

Hecklers were also part of the show. Richard Nixon grouched that they “transformed my speeches into shouting matches.” Truman’s GOP challenger, Thomas Dewey, was once hit by a flung tomato. In 1992, George H.W. Bush was hounded by people wearing chicken costumes and holding signs, chiding him for not agreeing to debate Bill Clinton. (Bush eventually did agree to debate; he didn’t say why but, Segal cracks, “fowl play was never ruled out.”)



*Whistle-Stop Politics: Campaign Trains and the Reporters Who Covered Them*

By Edward Segal  
Rock Creek Media

298 pages

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Segal’s book is silent on whether, and to what extent, trains might play a role in the 2024 election. But in promotional materials for the book, he reflects on the “timeless lessons” that can be drawn from the success of train campaigns. “Chief among those lessons is that it pays not to be subtle. Political theater still remains a crucial tool in the hands of the ambitious politician.”

It’s an interesting, albeit quaint, observation, given the utter lack of subtlety in an election in which a candidate who echoes Hitler, has been charged with dozens of felonies, and talks about exacting retribution on his political enemies, is leading in the polls.

It would be nice to think that the politics of the past—often contentious but nonetheless grounded in shared democratic values and traditions—is still a guiding light for the politics of the present.

But that train, sadly, has left the station. ♦

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